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ABSTRACT

Employers cite the following skills as important for both blue- and white-collar entry-level workers: (1) employee application and interview skills; (2) work-related social skills and habits, especially communication and interpersonal skills; (3) basic academic skills, particularly in reading, mathematics, writing, and problem solving/reasoning; and (4) vocational skills, especially manual/perceptual skills. Although employers look for a high school diploma, they appear to be less interested in grades or competency than in previous work experience. For most entry-level work, employers want an employee competent in the basic skills; they generally do not seek more advanced reading, writing and thinking skills. In fact, work-related social skills and habits are as important to employers as the basic skills: workers should present themselves well; be enthusiastic, responsible, cooperative, disciplined, flexible, and willing to learn; and show a general understanding of the workplace and business world. However, workers with these attributes are scarcer than those with the required core of academic skills. While schools should certainly develop higher order academic skills in all students, they should also ensure that students learn all the basic social and academic skills needed for an entry level job. A list of references is included. (BJV)

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HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES IN ENTRY LEVEL JOBS

WHAT DO EMPLOYERS WANT?

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HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES IN ENTRY LEVEL JOBS WHAT DO EMPLOYERS WANT?

Educators should not, of course, limit a high school graduate's capabilities to those skills employers want from entry-level employees. It is, however, instructive to review the new and fairly consistent information about which skills both blue- and white-collar entry-level workers need in such widely varied sectors as manufacturing, retailing, banking, and services. Note, too, that, when citing desired skills, employers do not make clear whether the skills are also necessary for their more advanced positions, though many students whose first job is an entry-level position will later move into more complicated work and/or continue in their schooling.

Although employers may have to screen a number of applicants before accepting one, only a relatively small percentage say they suffer from a shortage of qualified candidates at the entry level (Crain, 1984). Moreover, while employers look for high school diplomas, they appear to be less interested in grades or competency than in previous work experience. For most entry-level work, employers want an employee competent in the basic skills; they generally do not seek the more advanced reading, thinking, and scientific skills called for in many of the reform commission reports (Gufstafson & Groves, 1977; McPartland, et al., 1983). In fact, work-related social skills and habits are as important to employers as the basic skills: workers should present themselves well; be enthusiastic, responsible, cooperative, disciplined, flexible, and willing to learn; and show a general understanding of the workplace and world of business (CED, 1985; Crain, 1984; McPartland, et al., 1983; Owens & Monthey, 1983). However, hiring workers with these latter abilities is more difficult than finding ones with the required core of academic skills (McPartland, et al., 1983).

Employee Application and Interview

Because in most communities around the nation the number of applicants for entry-level positions far exceeds the openings, employers of large numbers of entry-level workers tend to screen applicants through written applications. They enable employers to evaluate such skills as correctly following written directions, using correct spelling and grammar. Moreover, if the applicant indicates a work history, stability and reliability can be determined from former employers (Gordon, 1985).

Interviews are used subsequently to evaluate a candidate's ability to communicate (including the use of full and appropriate language), appearance, confidence, knowledge of the company, and desire to learn (Chatham, 1982).

Work-Related Social Skills and Habits

Employers focus on personal traits and social skills—qualities that the Committee for Economic Development has termed part of "the invisible curriculum" of the school (CED, 1985, p. 20). Thus, when schools tolerate absenteeism, truancy, tardiness, sloppy work, and misbehavior, they are not helping students establish necessary work habits.

Although employers seldom consider grades or test scores, which high schools prospective entry-level employees attend can be important because of the social attitudes and skills presumed to have been taught. And, though employers rarely take into consideration whether a white prospective employee has attended an "inner-city high school" or a "suburban high school with a good reputation," they do see black, particularly male, prospective employees from suburban (usually predominantly white) high schools as potentially more acceptable employees. Although these suburban high schools are not necessarily expected to have given black male students a superior education, they are assumed to be less likely to have inner-city gangs and more likely to have socialized the students to be "more comfortble around whites" (Crain, 1984).

A survey of managers, supervisors, and employers of entry-level personnel found the following work-related social skills and habits *most important* in entry-level employees (Hulsart & Bauman, 1983):

Communication Skills: giving clear oral instructions and explanations of activities and ideas; reporting accurately on what others have said; staying on the topic in job-related conversations; using appropriate vocabulary and grammar; and following the intent of oral directions and instructions. This is the area in which entry-level employees do best, although some do have difficulty following the intent of oral instructions and using appropriate vocabulary and grammar.

Interpersonal Skills: functioning cooperatively with individual co-workers and as a team member; adhering to company policies and regulations, and to honesty, health, and safety standards; cooperating with the business' customers; being open to new ideas and methods; seeking clarification of instructions when necessary; exercising patience and tolerance; accepting constructive criticism and supervision; exhibiting leadership; and understanding supervisory authority and worker responsibility. Workers have most difficulty asking for clarification of instructions and accepting constructive criticism from supervisors. Often employees also exhibit the contradictory problem of not taking sufficient initiative at the same time as inappropriately assuming responsibility.

Basic Academic Skills

Few employers are looking for much more academically than basic literacy, but they do want workers who are "quick learners" (McPartland, et al., 1983) and who have a "willingness to adapt and learn" (Junge, 1983). Nevertheless, employers often cite inadequacies in basic skills—including,

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writing, reading, listening, the ability to communicate, and mathematics—noting that these inadequacies appear as causes for poor worker morale and high turnover, or prohibit advancement (Center for Public Resources, 1982; Junge, 1983, Hulsart & Bauman, 1983; Chatham, 1982).

A survey of managers, supervisors, and employers of entry-level personnel found the following academic skills considered *most important* in entry-level employees (Hulsart & Bauman, 1983):

Reading Skills: reading for details and following written directions. The importance of speed increases as the employee advances. Entry-level employees have the most difficulty interpreting pictoral information and understanding ideas and concepts. This affects, for example, their reading of instructions; employees tend to ask other workers for help rather than reading an instruction manual. On-the-job reading is more detailed and technical than most reading offered in high school.

Mathematics Skills: doing basic calculations, estimating quantities and using numerical values from charts and tables; checking for accuracy. Young workers most often have difficulty calculating numerical values from charts; constructing records requiring calculations; and using fractions, decimals, and formulas.

Writing Skills: writing legibly and completing forms accurately; writing standard English; selecting, organizing, and relating ideas; and proofreading one's own writing. Employers are more critical of writing than any other area, asserting that young workers have difficulty with all these aspects of writing and are unconcerned about accuracy.

Problem-Solving/Reasoning Skills: determining work activities to be performed; recognizing and using appropriate procedures and resources in carrying out the work; conducting work activities in appropriate sequence; recognizing the effects of changing the quantity or quality of materials; collecting and organizing information; identifying possible alternative approaches to solutions; reviewing progress periodically to assure timely completion; evaluating for accuracy and completeness and correcting deficiencies; summarizing and drawing reasonable conclusions; delivering completed work to the appropriate destination on time; and devising better work methods. Employees have most difficulty identifying alternative approaches and summarizing and drawing conclusions.

Vocational Skills

Except in some specialized businesses, few employers prefer workers with specialized vocational training. Vocational education graduates are very proficient in the skills they are trained in, but have a hard time generalizing these skills to other tasks (Owens & Monthey, 1983).

According to the survey of managers, supervisors, and employers of entry level personnel, the following were the *most important* vocational skills for entry-level employees:

Manual/Perceptual Skills: constructing, fabricating or assembling materials; using job specific hand tools and other equipment; developing visual presentations; using keyboard skills; and operating job-specific power equipment. Entry-level employees are generally successful in these skills.

Conclusion

The skills outlined above are important, universally agreed upon by employers, and set a minimum standard for entry-level work applicants. While schools should certainly develop higher order academic skills in all students, they should also ensure that students learn all the basic social and academic skills needed for an entry-level job.

—Carol Ascher

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